

SAMPLER

Country of Warm Snow

Also by Mervyn Taylor

An Island of His Own (1992)

The Goat (1999)

Gone Away (2006)

(published by Junction Press, New York)

No Back Door (2010)

The Waving Gallery (2014)

Voices Carry (2017)

(published by Shearsman Books)

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Mervyn Taylor

*Country of
Warm Snow*

SAMPLE

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2020 by
Shearsman Books
PO Box 4239
Swindon
SN3 9FN

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-727-8

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following where these poems have previously appeared: 'End Days', 'The Wind Dies Down', and 'Minding the Muse', *2 Bridges Review*; 'Dónde está', *Black Renaissance Noire*; 'After the Flood' and 'The Fight', *Boston Review*; 'Status', 'My Father's Jacket', and 'The Piano Teacher's Birthday', *Upstreet*; 'Resistance', *Killens Review of Arts & Letters*.

The title is taken from a note by the artist Josep Baqué describing a piece of his work, which reads, "Interior of some marvelous large islands at 2 million meters above sea level, unexplored, uninhabitable by civilized beings, a country of warm snow...".

I am thankful to my friend and fellow poet Susana Case, for going on the unfolding journey of this book, and for the house my father left me on this island I will always call home.

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For my father

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Status

Sheriff, the African tailor on Flatbush,
wants to learn English. He can speak
it, but not write it. He's from Conakry,

a word so wonderful I say it again—
Conakry. I offer him slips on which
to write the names of his customers

so he does not mix up the clothes.
When we converse, I find myself
imitating his accent, asking him

where he learned tailoring skills so
remarkable. The space where he sews
is like a cupboard, his four countrymen

squeezed in behind him. We discuss
our cultures, and talk about these
new immigration laws, how they

affect so many. I have no idea what
his status is. I only know that when
I stand before the mirror, my old suit

looks new, and that I would hide him
in my house, and feed him whatever
kind of soup it is they love over there.

City of Tailors

*Belmont, city of tailors seamlessly stitching June
and July together... —Derek Walcott*

The tailor shops have all but disappeared.
Mr. Wilson keeps his half-door open,
and a yard of lining, just in case.

Mackie can't see to thread the needle.
His last suit sits sleeveless on its mannequin,
the customer wearing an old one to the funeral.

Jinx rocks in the gallery of the old folks' home,
regaling them with tales about how
he used to make everyone wait,

while he catnapped over his Singer.
Everyone misses them, especially at Carnival,
when they made the sailor pants wide, and

on Tuesdays, when, dressed to compete,
they went shopping for chalk and fabric,
their seams always unbroken, even now,

as they prepare for that final fitting,
the kerchief in the breast pocket three-
pointed and gray, to match the worsted.

Begging a Lodging

I.

Between two buildings hangs a half-moon,
sparks flying from the fire where we fine-tune
our drums. But no matter how softly we play,

the neighbors call the police. When they come,
we let the light-skinned guy speak for us.
His accent always surprises the Americans.

One homeowner calls us foreign, says we pee on
her flowers. The half-moon lodged between
two walls floats like an island, in and out of focus.

2.

Down in the basements, illegal renters hide.
Tonight, the sky seems smaller, cut into rooms that
share a kitchen, a bathroom at the end of the hall.

When someone asks what happened to so-and-so,
we shake our head, only a week later to hear
he was found dead, half off the bed,

a smell like oysters shucked and gone bad,
in a manila envelope an expired passport and
a heart x-ray, the one he came here with.

3.

One morning I met my cousin on the cheese line
outside a neighborhood Pentecostal church.
When I scolded that it was meant for the poor,

he said, "This country has plenty to go around."
This is why we came, I thought, for the chance to
beg a lodging, for the moon, for the green cheese.

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In Any Country

after Roland Guy

There are men like Mahal,
who drive without cars, women
who sew without machines, and
others who lament the one that
take the money and gone Venezuela.

Sometimes they recover, the only
trace of the romance with the
crazy lady being the pain, from
when she turned the penis like a
crank, yelling, *All you men think of*

is sex, sex, sex! Still, you might
one day catch sight of Bobbin
riding his decorated bike and
crowing like a cock, declaring
his love for a prostitute. Or

poor Spit-in-the-Sea, trudging
down to the beach every morning,
towel over his shoulder as if going
for a swim. But it is only to spit, once,
determined to live up to his name.

Slow Boy with Harmonica

Every morning, in Carnival season, he goes down
to the Promenade where calypsonians entertain,
and Rachel the comedienne tells vulgar jokes.

He remembers a room nearby, where his father
used to visit a lady friend, leaving him with a soda
and sandwich, in a chair just outside her door.

He hopes one day Rachel will ask him what
he thought of the show. And he'll answer,
the harmonica warm in his pocket, that most of all

he enjoyed the anthem, which he was still learning
to play, and that he'd liked her a lot better
before she lost all that weight.

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Only Tourists Wear Shirts with Coconut Trees

They sidle through curio shops behind dark glasses.

They come from Milwaukee, Idaho, Ohio.

They want to know where the zoo is.

They don't understand the phrase,

You getting through?

They've been warned not to go further than
the cathedral, at the far end of the Promenade
from where their cruise ship docked.

On Charlotte Street, some follow a sign
pointing up a narrow flight of stairs.

They come down hours later, having lost
their shirts, the ones with the coconut trees,
the girls with the ukeleles dancing underneath.

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Aretha

In Port of Spain the taxi driver said
the woman on the radio singing
“Respect”, was Carla Thomas.
She performed here years ago.

That’s Aretha, I said.

He said, I meant to say, Aretha,
their voices sound so similar.
She used to sing with Otis.
No, I said, Otis sang with Carla.

Her daddy was Rufus.
He sang “Walking the Dog”.
In DC, I saw her play his record
on a jukebox, quarter after quarter.

That Aretha, said the cabbie,
she’s something else.

During Carnival, a Body Washes Ashore at Erin

The streets are full of half-naked bodies,
while this one pops, bloated and dead,
onto the beach, near where he dove.

Who send him, people will say, this time of
year, when current is wild, waves cresting.
Masqueraders jump high, remind us

of a song from long ago: *On Carnival Day,*
the beach have to come to town. They
gyrate in thongs banned from another

island, as images abound on social media,
of behinds being licked, nipples in
someone's mouth, rooms already reserved

for next year. It's hard to identify the local
who tried to escape it, his cheeks puffed
like that minister's who appears to be

smiling all the time. He must have been
a really good swimmer to chance the
lonely fold of water along this stretch

of sand, far from the trumpet's deafening
blast—a small danger by comparison to
the sea, its mouth wide with drownings.

American Girls

They had come up to New York for a wedding, my brother's sister-in-law Salome driving her brand new Cadillac. After the reception, her friend leaned over and asked if I had any gum. "Only what's in my mouth," I said, and she leaned closer, taking it between her teeth.

I thought then, of a letter my friend had written home, about American women, how if they liked you, they'd sleep with you the very first night.

All the way down to DC, where I'd start school in the fall, I observed the new country, the direct way they talked. Like when Lena, in answer to some remark Salome made, said, "I'll take him home when I'm ready. You watch the road."

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